



News Release

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New Campaign Aims at Fighting Pain Medication Abuse

Prescription and over-the-counter medications account for majority of overdose deaths

(Salt Lake City) – In 2006, more Utahns died as a result of over-the-counter or prescription drug overdoses than died in automobile crashes. The Utah Department of Health (UDOH) today announced a partnership with the Utah Attorney General, the Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing (DOPL) and the Utah Labor Commission (ULC) to combat the problem and investigate its causes.

Last year, the Office of the Medical Examiner (OME) investigated 476 drug-related deaths, more than any previous year. Nearly two-thirds of the deaths (307) were caused by legal drugs, either prescription or over-the-counter. The average age at death of legal-drug overdose victims was 42 years, with 51 percent being male. There was at least one legal-drug overdose death in 24 of the state's 29 counties. The most common legal drugs associated with fatal overdose were methadone, morphine, oxycodone, hydrocodone, and fentanyl. Non-narcotic prescription drugs were also common. Fewer than one-quarter (96) of overdose deaths were caused by illegal drugs.

“Sadly, far too many Utahns are falling victim to the epidemic of prescription pain medication misuse and abuse,” said Dr. David Sundwall, UDOH executive director. “This not only prevents them functioning up to their capacity, but is all too often fatal. As health care professionals and concerned citizens, we must work together to seek solutions that will protect our families, our schools and the public at large from this growing epidemic.”

The Pain Medication Management and Education Bill, sponsored by Rep. Bradley M. Daw and passed by the 2007 Utah Legislature, directs state agencies to develop a program to investigate the causes of, and reduce the deaths and harm from, the misuse and abuse of prescription pain medications.

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"I have experienced the tragic effects of prescription drug addiction both from personal acquaintances and from a public health perspective," said Rep. Daw. "I applaud the efforts of everyone involved to educate the medical community and the public at large about the wisest uses of these powerful drugs."

"Prevention is always better than prison," said Utah Attorney General Mark Shurtleff. "Everyone in law enforcement is working to get information out about the consequences of misusing prescription pain pills."

The state agencies will work cooperatively with one another to accomplish the following:

- Use the Controlled Substances Database, linked to records of the OME and death certificates, to investigate causes and risk factors associated with prescription pain medication-related deaths
- Develop best practice guidelines for health care providers for prescription and use of opiate pain medications
- Educate health care providers on best practices for prescribing opiate pain medications based on treatment guidelines
- Develop educational materials for patients
- Develop a media campaign aimed at the general public

"A recent federal study found Utah leads the nation in the non-medical use of prescription pain medications, with 6.5 percent of people age 12 or over having used these medications without a doctor's order in the past year," said Dr. Alan Colledge of the ULC "Utah employers recognize these significant, worsening trends and are committed to working with the state to help combat the problem."

"We commend the Utah Legislature for supporting state agencies in their fight against prescription drug abuse," said F. David Stanley, DOPL director, "The Controlled Substance Database team looks forward to assisting our state partners with this new program."

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The mission of the Utah Department of Health is to protect the public's health through preventing avoidable illness, injury, disability and premature death, assuring access to affordable, quality health care, and promoting healthy lifestyles.